

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 1st Sunday of Lent, February 14, 2016

Forward Momentum: Our God of Love

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February 14, 2016

Valentine's Day

Romans 10:8b-14

Today is the first Sunday of Lent, the period leading up to Easter, the period of our forward momentum toward the day when our salvation is reaffirmed. Lent is a time of reflection on what we have done with our lives and on repentance. It is a time of developing forward momentum in our life of faith and of reflecting on the meaning of salvation.

My message today in places repeats some points and some brief quotes that I made in a sermon about four years ago but which I believe bear repeating. My message also raises a lot of questions, most of which I can't answer definitively, but I hope they will get you thinking about what salvation means.

Presbyterians hear a lot about the Doctrine of Predestination. It is a fundamental belief of the Presbyterian Church but is frequently misunderstood.

The web site of the Highland Presbyterian Church in Fayetteville explains the doctrine quite well and dispels some myths about what predestination means. Quoting their web site, *"Essentially, predestination is a way of speaking about the sovereignty of God. Predestination is an act of God's will through which He elects or chooses whom He calls to faith and thus to eternal life."*

Now, whom does God choose? We know that all persons who accept Christ have been saved by God's grace. That is a given. We are saved but God gives us free will. We can accept that salvation or reject it. It is our choice but our all-knowing God knows what choice each of us will make. God knows which of us will choose to opt out. That is where the misconception that God has chosen in advance who will be saved and who won't be arises. God doesn't make the choice. We do, but God knows what choice each one of us will make.

Again, quoting the Highland Presbyterian Church's web page, *"Presbyterians today do not adhere to an understanding of predestination which professes that God*

draws pleasure from foreordaining some people for condemnation. Presbyterians believe that such teachings are not consistent with the Biblical image of a God “who wants all people to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4)...we see predestination as part of a doctrine of providence: God cares about everything he has created, and God has a purpose for each person who has been created.”

In his bestselling book *Love Wins*, Rob Bell raises questions about salvation that have long concerned me as a Christian and as a pastor.

Is accepting Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior the only way to achieve salvation? If so, what about the billions of people over history who have never heard about Jesus Christ and the many millions who lived and died before the time of Christ. Are they doomed to Hell for all eternity?

Will Mahatma Gandhi rot in Hell forever?

What about Siddhartha Gautama, the founder of Buddhism?

What about a child who dies in infancy and who has never been baptized?

What about all of the prophets of the Old Testament? They never knew Jesus.

What about the millions of people over the centuries and even today who never have known about Christ?

What about atheists who are good and caring people and who dedicate their lives to helping others?

Would a loving God ignore these people and doom them to Hell?

Millions of people live lives that are admirable and caring but do not worship Jesus and billions more have never had the opportunity to know about Christ.

Personally, I cannot believe that a loving God would ignore these people and treat them in the same way that Adolph Hitler or Osama bin Laden might be treated. Our God is a God of love and compassion, not a God of vengeance. How then can we say that non-believers are cast out from any possibility for salvation?

Does our God of love not love all of humankind, Christians and non-Christians alike? I believe that he does. Christ didn't put any limits on his love and forgiveness. Why then would God?

Our epistle reading from Paul's letter to the Romans says, *“Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame. For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile --*

the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

OK, that much is clear. If you accept and follow Jesus, the Christ, you will be saved by grace. Period. End of report.

But is that really all? Can others be saved? 1st John 2:2, in referring to Jesus, suggests that they can with the words, *“He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for us but also for the sins of the whole world.”* Remember the thief who was crucified along with Jesus? He was not a believer. He knew that Jesus was a good man who had been unfairly convicted. *“The thief had nails through both hands, so that he could not work; and a nail through each foot, so that he could not run errands for the Lord; he could not lift a hand or a foot toward his salvation, and yet Christ offered him the gift of God; and he took it. Christ threw him a passport and took him into paradise.”* (D. L. Moody, “Day by Day with D. L. Moody,” Moody Press).

Our epistle passage from Romans goes on to ask, *“But how, then, can they call on one they have not believed in? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching to them?”* These are the same questions that I am asking. How can these people be saved?

Can a person live a life of charity and concern for others, a life unblemished by hate or crime, a life of unbounded love for humankind, and not receive salvation because he or she never knew Christ or never had the opportunity to know Christ? In other words, a person like Mahatma Gandhi, or like Siddhartha Gautama, or like so many others.

Would our God of love do that to them? Would they all go to Hell, if there is a Hell, and if so, what is Hell?

We picture Hell as a place run by Satan who marches around with a pitchfork pushing people into fires where they scream out in agony for all eternity. Is that what Hell is? I don't think so.

If you go back to the Old Testament scriptures you won't find any such description of Hell other than the Hebrew word “Sheol” referring to a mysterious place where people go when they die, the realm of the dead – no fires, no agony, no pitchforks, no devils. The Bible really doesn't tell us what Hell is like.

I have told you before that In the New Testament the Greek word that is translated into Hell is "Gehenna", literally meaning "Valley of Hinnom", an actual valley near Jerusalem which was used as the trash dump for Jerusalem. It was keep burning in order to get rid of the trash and to prevent pestilence. In the context of Jesus' days, going to Hell literally meant being thrown out with the garbage. Jesus was most likely using the garbage dump allegorically as referring to death with little or no hope of salvation or resurrection.

So what can we conclude from scripture? Going to Hell simply seems to refer to dying without salvation. **Period.**

If that is the case, does anyone have hope of salvation if they never accepted Christ or didn't have the opportunity to do so?

Our epistle reading raises the question of what happens to those who don't know Jesus. Further in Romans 11, referring to persons who lived long before the time of Christ, we find the words, "*So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. And if by grace, then it cannot be based on works; if it were grace would no longer be grace.*" This passage refers to the period long before Christ and to the fact that God's grace was available to others.

Then in Paul's letter to the Galatians, chapter 2, verse 16 we read: "*We ... know that a person is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ.*" Sounds totally clear doesn't it? But is it? The words "*in Jesus Christ*" have another meaning in the original Greek. Often Greek words have multiple meanings depending upon the context in which they are used. The second meaning is "*of Jesus Christ*", not "*in Jesus Christ*." In this context grace results through the faith **of** Jesus Christ, not through faith **in** Jesus Christ. Which interpretation is correct? I don't know and I leave it to you to decide for yourself.

The Rev. Mike Johnston, my co-pastor at First Presbyterian in Bessemer City said, "*... where did we get the notion that Jesus' statement that he is the way, the truth and the life pertain exclusively to Christians?*"

"... Jesus has said, 'I have other sheep not of this fold.' Jesus has the freedom to call whomever he chooses, however he chooses, whenever he chooses, even if they may not know it. This answers the nagging question about the person of another faith

tradition who leads a holy life, who is clearly in contact with the living God but does not confess Jesus as Lord and Savior.”

Jesus declares that he alone saves everybody. He leaves the door open for all good people everywhere, Christian or not. Our loving God and Savior would not have it any other way.

Amen.

Note: Scripture quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible, 2011